

States Lacking Strong Seat Belt Laws Have More Fatalities On Rural Roads

ScienceDaily (Nov. 22, 2007) — Thanksgiving marks the heaviest travel weekend of the year and that means large increases in the number of fatal car crashes, particularly in rural areas. And nowhere is that more true than in states that don't adequately enforce seat belt laws.

The University of Minnesota Center for Excellence in Rural Safety (CERS) have released an analysis showing a strong connection between states lacking strong seat belt laws and states with a high proportion of fatalities on rural roads.

"For some reason, the states struggling most with rural fatalities are not using one of the most powerful tools at their disposal," said CERS Director Lee Munnich Jr., of the University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs.

Of the 10 states with the highest percentage of fatalities in rural areas in 2005, none had primary seat belt laws, or laws that allow law enforcement officers to pull people over for not using their seat belts. In contrast, 13 of the 20 states with the lowest percentage of fatalities in rural areas had enacted primary seat belt laws. See chart at the end of this release for how states measure up.

States that enact primary seat belt laws have increased their seat belt usage rates dramatically, by an average of 14 percent, which in turn reduces the number of injuries and deaths. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), 250 more lives per year are saved and 6,400 serious injuries per year are prevented for every one percentage-point increase in safety belt use nationally.

"It makes no sense that, in more than half of the states, law enforcement officials can stop drivers for having a burned out tail light or outdated license tags, but they are banned from enforcing the safety law that may prevent more highway fatalities than any other," Munnich said.

This is particularly relevant in rural areas. While U.S. Census figures show that about two out of 10 (21 percent) Americans live in rural areas, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) has found that about six out of ten (57 percent) percent of highway deaths happen on roads that it considers rural.

And the people dying on rural roads are not just rural residents. In fact, more than half (53 percent) of rural fatalities in the United States in 2005 involved at least one driver from an urban area.

There are many reasons for America's high rate of rural crash deaths. Rural roads, with lighter traffic and pleasant scenery, can easily lull drivers into a false sense of security. An over-relaxed comfort level can lead to motorists driving at unsafe speeds, distracted, fatigued, unbelted or impaired, all of which increase the likelihood of a crash. Additionally, emergency response time to a rural crash and hospital transport can be lengthy and thus jeopardize survival rate. Crash victims are five to seven times more likely to die from their injuries unless they arrive at a trauma center in the first half-hour following the crash.

According to the U.S. Department of Transportation, the most traveled day of the year is the Sunday after Thanksgiving, when 13.7 million long-distance trips are made. The day after Christmas is second most traveled day during the holidays (12 million trips).

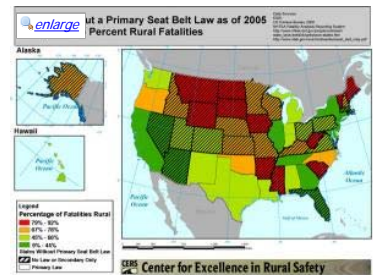
"Over 90 percent of Thanksgiving trips will be by car, and many will pass through rural areas," said Munnich. "Those scenic rural drives 'over the river and through the woods' may seem safer than urban trips, but that's not true, particularly if you can get away with not buckling up."

State-by-state rural fatality data from 2005 was compiled by CERS researchers using information from the U.S. Department of Transportation. Rural roads are identified as those located outside of areas with a population of 5,000 or more.

The Center for Excellence in Rural Safety provides citizen-centered research, training, and outreach to enhance rural safety and to meet the needs of rural transportation practitioners and policymakers. The U.S. Congress created the Center for Excellence in Rural Safety in July 2005 as part of a broader, multiyear, multimillion-dollar directive establishing four national centers for surface transportation excellence in the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) transportation funding legislation.

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States without a primary seat belt law as of 2005 compared to percent rural fatalities. (Credit: Image courtesy of University of Minnesota)

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University of Minnesota (2007, November 22). States Lacking Strong Seat Belt Laws Have More Fatalities On Rural Roads. *ScienceDaily*. Retrieved June 18, 2010, from <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2007/11/071120120807.htm>

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